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AUTHOR Parks, Russell E.  
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## ABSTRACT

The Outdoor Pursuit Center at Miami University, Ohio, has provided an outdoor orientation experience for incoming first-year students since 1995. The experience provides an environment that is effective in easing the transition into higher education settings. Student trip coordinators, student facilitators, faculty, and professional staff use situational leadership models to develop an atmosphere that addresses anxieties, excitement, and a sense of belonging. Student challenges include environmental physical situations, mental problem solving, group dynamics, and cognitive skill utilization. A supportive environment is provided through staff efforts, daily event processing, shared responsibilities, and safety precautions. The framework of the program consists of situating the learning experience, validating student concerns, and mutually constructing meaning. Pre- and post-activity debriefings, coupled with daily reviews and processing initiatives, thoroughly investigate student feelings and apprehensions about participating in adventure activities and help to transfer participant outcomes and insights to academic life. The most effective tools in the program for summative, qualitative, and quantitative evaluations of the transition experience are group journals and focus groups. Lessons learned in formulating and implementing the program relate to developing collaborative goals, designating responsibility, determining resources, determining type of trip, and communicating with students. (SAS)

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## MIAMI BOUND: ISSUES IN TRANSITION

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By

Russell E. Parks  
Assistant Director  
Outdoor Pursuit Center  
Miami University, Ohio  
Oxford, OH 45056

Robert Jones

### ABSTRACT:

The Outdoor Pursuit Center at Miami University, Ohio has provided an outdoor orientation experience for incoming first year students since 1995. The purpose of this Miami Bound outdoor orientation program is to provide an atmosphere and learning environment that is effective in easing the transition into higher education settings. This is accomplished by validating, supporting, and mutually constructing the adventure orientation programs with the students. The Miami Bound is a collaborative effort of the Outdoor Pursuit Center (OPC) and the Office of First Year Programs and Orientation, and involves students, faculty, and staff on all expeditions.

Remember the first week of college? The overwhelming feeling of being so small and insignificant among a pool of very intelligent and talented individuals, away from home, outside of the comfort zone that you had developed over the high school years? This is a common experience for many first year students on university campuses across the nation. Searching for alternative orientation programs that effectively address transitional issues has lead many programs to adventure orientation programs that require individuals to interact for extended periods in that great equalizer, the natural environment. These programs have the opportunity to reach students of all nationalities, racial and cultural backgrounds, and income levels. Our mission is simple; to provide the adventure experience that allows students the opportunities to face First Year transition issues, and to provide appropriate facilitation linking these issues back to university life while in the field.

The outdoor "classroom" provides many unique opportunities for individuals to interact; problem solve, socialize, role play, process daily activities, and focus on the transition into college life with peers and mentors. Miami Bound, the outdoor orientation program at Miami University, Ohio, integrates several different campus departments into the program in order to expose students to a variety of perspectives and introduce them to valuable resources in the University environment.

**Student Trip Coordinators** from the Outdoor Pursuit Center provide the logistical support in the field, including but not limited to; route planning, reservations, time control plans, energy control plans, safety control plans, transportation needs, lodging, equipment, site management, and the point of contact while in the field.

**Student Facilitators** from the Orientation office provide the leadership and facilitation of daily processing sessions and monitor group dynamics. They also assist with trip logistics, transportation, and safety of the group.

**Faculty** are often on the trips to provide this very important perspective for students.

Professors are required to provide several sessions on their area of expertise, formally and informally. It is often outside of these sessions that the students learn the most from the faculty, that they are real people with fears and issues related to participation in adventure activities. In turn, faculty learn more about students and the issues they face in coming to college.

**Professional Staff** from both the Outdoor Pursuit Center and Residence Life are participants on a few trips, offering yet another perspective for students to bounce issues and ideas off of during trip preparation, on location, and during follow up programs.

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The students and staff of Miami Bound are interested in providing an atmosphere that addresses the following:

- Anxieties-** Reducing anxieties concerning academic and social life; such as leaving family and friends, understanding university expectations, managing college life, living in diverse communities, and residence hall life.
- Excitement-** Foster a sense of excitement about the Miami experience through: integration of the history and culture of the Miami Indian tribe into the university community, and an awareness of opportunities and resources available on campus.
- Sense of Belonging-** Provide a welcome sense of belonging to each and every individual that participants regardless of their history and background: this is developed through formal and informal interaction between student trip coordinators, faculty, and staff of the university.

Organized around a base of several student development and leadership theories, Miami Bound focuses its structure on situational leadership models where responsibility and authority to make decisions is transferred from trip coordinators to participants as they mature during the experience. Issues of self-responsibility and responsibility to the group are explored in this manner. Utilizing a combination of these different theories provides challenge and support in psycho-social and cognitive domains. Experiential learning opportunities provide for active exploration and experimentation concerning transitional issues and situations, as well as, real life consequences and outcomes related to how these issues and situations are handled. It is through these challenges that we believe students will grow in ways that may not be natural for them.

### Challenges

Several obstacles are confronted by participants of Miami Bound, some are not as apparent to students but are rewarding when they worked through them. The physical challenge is often the most apparent, whether it be the adventure activity itself, or just living in the outdoors out of one's comfort zone, many incoming students struggle with this foundation of the experience. Mental challenges of problem solving, utilizing cognitive skills in the field, and working through issues with the group and self are all negotiated by participants in structured, and unstructured, activities and experiences. Roles and responsibilities of the individual for each day are developed in detail and rotated between the group members. Each participant will serve as leader for the day, navigator, weather monitor, morale monitor, camp chores crew member, safety monitor, and other roles in order to provide unique group dynamics to be discussed and framed as metaphors that can impact academic campus experiences. Group initiatives at the end of each day offer another chance to monitor the group and provide a more 'formal' setting for individuals to be heard and experiences to be shared. These initiatives provide a great challenge for young adults to work together and allow students an opportunity to gain more meaning from the expedition experience.

### Supports

A supportive environment is provided through several areas, the first being the varied and unique staff as discussed above. Secondly, the processing of daily events is designed to provide an open forum that validates student issues allowing students quality time to share common and diverse feelings of the group and individual. This is accomplished through the appropriate framing of questions, sequenced questions and comments used by facilitators to help the group purposefully determine what is actually shared, how information is summarized, interpreted, generalized, and transferred to university life. Shared responsibilities offer additional support for the incoming student through constant application and opportunity teaching. During the review of the day, initiatives, and adventure activities, these responsibilities and activities serve as real metaphors that can be related to issues that will be confronted at school. Lastly, safety precautions are always enforced during adventure activities and travel. Skilled and trained staff, proper equipment, and emergency planning are all very relevant and real supports for each individual.

### Framework

Implementing the above ideas and goals into a successful program has been greatly due to following three principles:

- Situating the Learning Experience-** framing of experiences and activities is critical to teasing out concepts and issues that need to be addressed,

**Validating Students-** listening and taking concerns of students seriously, as well as involving them in the development and implementation of the goals of the program, has tremendous impact upon the growth of the student while a participant in the program;

**Mutually Constructing Meaning-** group input and development of the goals, community contracts, and processing of daily events all mutually construct meaning of events and situations throughout the expedition experience.

## The Process

Incoming first year students at Miami University are required to take a two day orientation program on campus the summer before school begins. Materials for Miami Bound are included in the packets that they receive for their campus orientation session. Selection of the type of trip desired warrants additional details regarding the specific activity requirements, equipment needs, and itinerary. After the campus session, those students who have selected to participate in a Miami Bound Outdoor Orientation program arrive at the Outdoor Pursuit Center for the welcoming activities and pre-trip preparations.

Several trips set out for their destination the day of arrival, some may stay one night on campus and begin bright and early the next morning. All transportation is by a fifteen passenger university vans, and begin and end at the campus. This is an important time for development of the group, several hours in confined quarters while traveling offers many opportunities for group and personal revelations.

The activity itself takes place in the outdoors, in a variety of settings and activity levels. Students may choose from the following list of sites and activities for their Miami Bound experience;

- ♦ Backpacking- Smoky and Rocky Mountain National Parks
- ♦ Whitewater canoeing / kayaking- Pike, Peshtigo, Wolf Rivers (Wisconsin)
- ♦ Flatwater canoeing / kayaking- Clarion River (Pennsylvania), Boundary Waters Canoe Area
- ♦ Rock Climbing- Devil's Lake (Wisconsin)
- ♦ Cycling- Southern Indiana

## Transition, Bringing it Home

Pre and post-activity debriefings coupled with daily reviews and processing initiatives provide a thorough investigation into participants feelings, fears, and apprehensions regarding the activity, and how these encounters transfer to academic life. One of the most significant resources for both the individual and the group is a journal. Journals are kept by each individual, a separate one is provided for the group, to record their comments and observations. Observation and reflection of each activity, structured or not, is vital to the success of the program. Time is built into the course of the day for participants to write in personal and group journals. Sharing these issues is also important for the group to come together and grow, yet personal journals are also a source of escape and confidence that should not be violated.

Developing metaphors, abstractions, and generalizations about life in the university community is equally important in the transition process. Residence Life and Student Affairs can offer several publications and documents regarding the demographics and percentages of significant items regarding the student population that are relevant to orientation programs. Studying and using these within your program will assist with the development of the incoming students. Most importantly, all decisions, issues, fears, goals, problems, motivations, expectations, etc. must be framed with the university environment in mind while in the field.

## Evaluation

As with all programs, evaluation of the transition experience is vital to its future success. Summative, qualitative, and quantitative evaluations are utilized in assessing the program in its entirety and the effectiveness of easing transition into academic communities. Of these, the most effective tool has proven to be the group journals and focus groups. Group journals are collected at the close of the experience and used for evaluation with several departments. Focus groups are arranged throughout the following semester to monitor the students' progress and transition. These sessions have specific facilitators and evaluations, but serve as a 'reunion' as well.

## Lessons Learned

**Develop Goals-** determine the collective meaning of the program if operating in conjunction with other departments on or off campus;

**Designate Responsibilities-** be specific with job descriptions of students, staff, faculty, and other leaders within the program;

**Determine Resources-**

**Financial-** Miami Bound is funded through two departments, determine the amount that each is responsible for in advance;

**Physical-** natural areas, vehicles, adventure equipment;

**Personnel-** summer availability with university student leaders, staff, and faculty is sometimes problematic. Our model utilizes two OPC staff and one Orientation staff with each group;

**Determine Type of Trip-**

**Base Camp / High Adventure / or Combination;** It has been our experience that programs providing the greatest impact for incoming students have been the multiple-day, backcountry, experience because they provide more opportunities for group and individual dynamics to occur.

**Communication with Students-**

Be specific and detailed in all promotional and registration materials;

Address anxieties immediately;

Be clear about the student selection process;

Create firm deadlines for registration and preparation to allow for proper planning and participant communication;

Develop concrete policies for cancellation;

Provide alternative methods of communication, such as e-mail or a web page.

## Summary

Offering outdoor orientation programs for incoming students has been very successful for Miami University. It has enabled students to confront issues of transition into the academic and social experiences of the university and enhance their awareness of the surrounding environment, resources, and support when they arrive. Most importantly, the program has provided several students the opportunity to work directly with a wide variety of individuals in situations where trust, communication, and responsibility are vital to the success of the individual and group.

"Our trip is finally over, or is it? Is this trip a precept to the rest of our existence? The challenges that we encountered on the rock were just sneak peeks into the future. The way people engage the obstacles explain a person's attitude toward their life. Students come to college to change themselves into the people they want to be. The Devil's Lake experience has become somewhat of a metaphorical yardstick of where we are in our life."

-Adam, Group Journal